



From Self-Interest to Self-Surrender: Confronting the Challenges of Prayer

Dr. Benjamin Sommer

Benjamin D. Sommer joined The Jewish Theological Seminary faculty as professor of Bible in July 2008. Previously, he served as director of the Crown Family Center for Jewish Studies at Northwestern University, where he had taught since 1994. Dr. Sommer has been a fellow at the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the Tikvah Center for Jewish Law and Civilization at the New York University School of Law, and the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. He has served as a visiting faculty member in the Department of Bible of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at the Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. He has received fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies and the Yad Hanadiv/Berakha Foundation.

Dr. Sommer's most recent book, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* received the prestigious Goldstein-Goren Prize in Jewish Thought from Ben Gurion University for the years 2014-2016 and was a finalist for both for the National Jewish Book Award for 2015 and the Association for Jewish Studies' Jordan Schnitzer Prize for 2014-2016. An earlier book by Professor Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, received the Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion in 2010 awarded by the American Academy of Religion, as well as the Jordan Schnitzer Award from the Association for Jewish Studies for the years 2006-2009. The first book Dr. Sommer published, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66*, was awarded the Salo Wittmayer Baron Prize by the American Academy of Jewish Research in 1998.

Dr. Sommer has long been active as a lecturer and scholar-in-residence, teaching rabbis, Jewish educators, and laypeople in a variety of settings in the United States and Israel.

“When the spirit moves me”

— George Fox (17th century, the founder of Quakerism), Thomas Edwards (17th century a Calvinist clergyman)

- Low church / pietistic / deeply individual: many Protestant forms of Christianity, including Quakerism, some types of Calvinism (e.g., Puritan, Reformed, Presbyterian), Baptist denominations, some Methodism/Wesleyanism, Mennonites denominations (e.g., Amish)
- High church / liturgical / ceremonial: Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholicism

כָּל הַבְּרָכוֹת כִּלְכֵן שְׁלֹשָׁה מִיָּנִים. בְּרָכוֹת הַנְּהִיָּה. וּבְרָכוֹת מְצֻוֹת. וּבְרָכוֹת הַוְדָאָה שֶׁהֵן דְּרָךְ שְׂבִיחַ וְהוֹדָיָה
וּבְקִשָּׁה כְּדֵי לְזַכֵּר אֶת הַבּוֹרֵא תָמִיד וּלְיַרְאֵה מִמֶּנּוּ: [יד, ספר אהבה, הל' ברכות א' ג'ד']

Maimonides *Mishneh Torah*, Sefer Ahavah, Berakhot 1:3–4: “There are three types of blessings: blessing over things enjoyed or used; blessings over commandments; and blessings of acknowledgement [הוֹדָאָה], which include praise, thanksgiving [הוֹדָיָה], and petition, so that we might remember our creator at all time and to regard Him with awe.”

Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:44 (Pines trans.): “The end of these actions pertaining to the divine service is the constant commemoration of God, the love of Him, and the fear of Him, the obligatory observance of the commandments in general, and the bringing-about of such belief concerning Him, may He be exalted, as is necessary for every one professing the Law.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Prayer,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 343: “Prayer is a way...to discern between the signal and the trivial, between the vital and the futile, by taking counsel with what we know about the will of God...Prayer clarifies our hopes and intentions. It helps us discover our true aspirations...Prayer teaches us what to aspire for.”

Philip and Carol Zaleski, *Prayer: A History*, 131, speak of “the self-effacement needed in order to say prayers in unison with others, a willed anonymity that Thomas Merton describes as ‘the complete opposite to the logic of the world’” [quoting Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain*, 368]. 134: “To perceive oneself as part of a book authored by God — to learn that one is written, not writer; passive, not active, in relation to the Creation — ... [all these things] serve as gestures of submission. ... One cannot draw near to God without emptying oneself; when one is nothing, God is all.”

וְשַׁח גְּבוּהוֹת הָאָדָם וְשָׁפַל רוּם אַנְשִׁים וְנִשְׁגַּב יְיָ הַנֶּה לְבָדוֹ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא: וְהָאֱלִילִים כָּלִיל יִחַלְפוּ: [ישעיה ב' י"ז-י"ח]

Isaiah 2:17–18: “Human haughtiness will be brought low, and man’s pride will be cut down to size, and none but Hashem will be raised up that day. And the little godlets will just disappear.”

Some quotes from Abraham Joshua Heschel:

“How grateful am I that there is a duty to worship, a law to remind my distraught mind that it is ... time to disregard my ego for at least a moment!”

“Prayer may be described as a shift of the center of living — from self-consciousness to self-surrender.”

“We submit our interests to His concern and seek to be allied with what is ultimately right.”

“What...makes prayer possible is our ability to affiliate our minds with the pattern of fixed texts...to surrender to their meanings...Man submits to the words. The focus of prayer is not the self. Prayer is an invitation to God to intervene in our lives, to let His will prevail in our affairs; it is the opening of a window to Him in our will, an effort to make Him Lord of our soul. We submit our interests to His concern and seek to be allied with what is ultimately right.”

—Selected from “The Spirit of Jewish Prayer,” in *Moral Grandeur*, 113; “Prayer as Discipline,” in *Insecurity of Freedom*, 255, 256; “Prayer,” in *Moral Grandeur*, 342, 343, 348, 349 [cf. “The Spirit of Jewish Prayer,” in *Moral Grandeur*, 106].

עול מצוות = the yoke of the commandments. Cf. Sanskrit *yoga* = yoke.

Carol and Philip Zaleski, *Prayer: A History*, 74, 75: “Magical prayer asks for results, but sacrificial prayer asks for grace, relinquishing the fruits. ... Sacrificial prayer assumes that God’s will is in harmony with our deepest wish, whether we realize it or not...When we pray sacrificially..., we gain freedom, self-mastery, and joy—being, consciousness, and bliss..., in the Hindu formula, even if our immediate wish is denied.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Prayer,” in *Moral Grandeur*, 348–49: “The focus of prayer is not the self...Prayer comes to pass in a complete turning of the heart toward God, toward His goodness and power...The consciousness of a supplicant...| is not concentrated upon his own interests but on something beyond the self. The thought of personal need is absent, and the thought of divine grace alone is present in his mind. Thus, in beseeching Him for bread, there is *one* instant, at least, in which our mind is directed neither to our hunger nor to food but to His mercy. That instant is prayer.”

Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 432–33: “The standard terminology of the liturgy, no details of which can be arbitrarily changed, and which is employed with the utmost conservatism, is itself an approximation to silence; and it is the experience of every celebrant and liturgist that while repeating the words of the liturgy he must himself be silent; ... The strangeness of liturgical language is also an approach to silence. ... This worshipful silence, however, is no lack of audibility; it has not a negative but a positive value.”

Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:59 (Pines trans.): “Silence with regard to You is praise. For of whatever we say intending to magnify and exalt, on the one hand we find that it can have some application to Him, may He be exalted, and on the other we perceive in it some deficiency. Accordingly, silence and limiting oneself to the apprehensions of the intellects are more appropriate.”

לָךְ דְּמִלָּה תִּהְיֶה אֱ-לֹהִים בְּצִיּוֹן וְלָךְ יִשְׁלַם-נֶדְוֶר: [תהילים ס"ה ב']
Psalm 65:2: “To You, silence is praise, O God in Zion; to You a vow should be paid.”